

Greater Medieval Religious Houses

Synopsis

This document gives access to information and photographs concerning 751 Greater Religious Houses, i.e., abbeys, priories, cathedrals, collegiate churches, preceptories, and other institutions, in Great Britain. Sets of information sheets relevant to institutions in each county can be visited by clicking on the relevant entity in the 2nd column of Table 1 on Page 9.

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Introduction

Interest in medieval religious buildings can presumably reinforce a person's religious belief in so far as churches of all types and their associated buildings are tangible and frequently impressive manifestations of strong faith. However, I know that many committed Christians nowadays see their surroundings when worshipping as a matter of little consequence, and when they give it any thought, regard the resource devoted to religious building in times when poverty was endemic, as inappropriate or worse. There is no getting away from the fact that most senior churchmen lived uncommonly well in comparison with the bulk of the population in medieval times. I do not wish to stray for long into questions around the morality of this; religious belief was clearly strong enough to render the mass of the people generally acquiescent, although the demands of abbatial landlords were often at least as harsh as those of their secular peers. Nonetheless, there were riots throughout the Middle Ages around religious establishments, and assassinations of senior clerics, who unsurprisingly, felt the need to protect themselves, their possessions, and the regular clergy living there, hence high precinct walls, moats, and fortified gatehouses. In fact, the religious system in England and Wales was overthrown in a Reformation driven from the very top in the 1530s, thanks to King Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell, though the King vacillated with regard to the extent of the change he desired. In Scotland, John Knox put himself at the head of something more like a mass movement, but the key changes were pushed through, rather later and more slowly, by the great magnates.

There are some remarkable aspects of the population of medieval religious establishments which remain visible to a greater or lesser extent in Britain today. Obviously, many of the surviving parts of the abbeys and cathedrals are hugely impressive structures in their own right, whether ruined or whole, long since fallen into disuse or still at the centre of community or even national life. However, even more than the grandeur of many individual buildings, the quantity of religious buildings of all types is a source of wonder, given that the British population was for much of the period in question, between 5% and 8% of what it is now and the wealth of the nation, much less than 1% of its current value. Of course, building costs were less then, but it perhaps puts things in context to consider that King Edward I of England almost bankrupted his country to build a few castles in North Wales, in the late-13th century, whereas there were far greater numbers of substantial religious buildings under construction in the same period, albeit that these projects usually made much slower progress, and so incurred costs at a lesser rate. It is worth contemplating just how many capable masons there must have been amongst the aforementioned small population, not to mention craftsmen with other skills, to make possible the religious building programme, and competing projects such as castles, burgh and guild halls, bridges, and the houses of rich individuals. On the other hand, in assessing what survives, it needs to be remembered that although there are examples of every type of medieval building being cast down intentionally rather than crumbling as a result of neglect and decay, the systematic orgy of destruction of religious buildings which followed the Dissolution in England has no secular counterpart, dwarfing the destruction resulting from the sleighting of castles during and after the Civil War.

My own interest, which has no backing from religious faith, was best described as casual, embracing occasional visits to well-known sites, for some decades before I retired in 2005. Since then, I have visited most parts of

Britain, taking increasing notice of old buildings generally. A few years ago I turned my interest in old bridges into a project, concentrating on masonry bridges built pre-1700. Using many sources, I listed all the documented bridges I could find, and then visited the great majority, (94% of 865), obtaining photographs and collecting data to define them. I installed a compendium on my website which includes an information sheet for each one visited, together with tabulations which allow comparisons to be made, and trends to be spotted. I decided recently to create a more limited compendium for medieval religious establishments, recognising of course that they are far more complex than bridges and that they have captured the attention of many experts. I had to decide initially on criteria for selection, and omission; there were two useful starting-points. I had already visited a large number of medieval religious establishments, hundreds in fact, and it was easy enough to divide them into categories, on one or more of which I might focus thereafter. The other avenue was to look at similar categories as covered by the written sources of information. There are many high-quality books ranging from the general, covering whole countries and picking out, sometimes idiosyncratically, the religious buildings most notable in the eye of the author, to the more restricted, covering counties, or specific building styles more comprehensively. In addition, many old churches have produced their own guide books, though understandably, many focus more on the message they wish to convey than the fabric and history of their premises; this comment applies also to many of the websites of working churches. I settled on a category of greater medieval religious houses, defined, as will be seen, in a fashion that selected a largish population, and set out to collect and present information on the selected establishments.

In fixing the limits of any compendium, it is easiest to start by eliminating the items clearly outside. The excluded lesser religious houses comprise the whole populations of parish churches built as such, and importantly, remaining as such without a break throughout their lives, regardless of size, antiquity and fame, and of stand-alone chapels associated with private houses, bridges, and other public buildings. This leaves the greater religious houses which mainly fall into two families with enough in common to justify their being considered together, namely monasteries and collegiate churches, which I shall now attempt to define. Monasteries were (and are) residential establishments for regular clergy like monks, canons, nuns and friars, the grandest of which are abbeys and cathedrals, but also including priories, nunneries, friaries, cells, granges, and hospitals. A significant number were founded in the early middle ages, i.e. before the Norman Conquest of England, but the majority of those were re-founded after that seminal event which rippled outwards to affect Wales and Scotland as well, albeit in different ways; many more appeared for the first time after 1066. Some were amongst the largest enterprises of their day and could only be founded by kings and magnates, or by other monasteries, which had to be thriving to endow their daughter houses sufficiently to afford their extensive buildings and costly upkeep.

The other class of greater medieval religious houses are the collegiate churches. They varied widely in ambition and scale, comprising some cathedrals, minster churches, educational establishments, and perhaps contradictorily, smaller chantry chapels and churches. Rather than size, they have in common, the attachment to them of colleges of secular priests, who met and acted together, but for whom communal segregated living was not always prescribed; nor necessarily was celibacy. Such churches often began as parish churches, but were then endowed as chantries or more ambitiously, colleges, usually by a local landowner. The funds received were used to appoint a group of priests, often prebendary canons, each supported by the income from a specific

parish or estate; together they were expected to mirror some of the duties of regular clergy in monasteries, as regards general prayer and blameless living. They would pray especially for the souls of the family who had supplied the endowment and expediently, the Royal family, while continuing with the pastoral and preaching duties for the community in the parish and frequently other parishes, including those from which their incomes derived. Along with paying for these secular canons, often two or three in number, but sometimes many more, such endowments often permitted enlargement of the church, especially the choir, and the addition of chapels dedicated to the benefactors. Obviously, provision had also to be made to house the canons, and to permit them to study and meet; the arrangements for living might be communal but often were not so. Those which survive make it clear that canons whether living together, or separately in manses in their prebends lived very well, and supported the vicars who deputised for them, and other choristers and clerks who made up the colleges.

Another relatively small group, separate from the above two main categories comprised the preceptories and commanderies of the religious orders of knighthood, namely the Templars before their suppression in the first years of the 14th century, and the Hospitallers; I include them also in the compendium, though their establishments usually bore more resemblance to a modern farmstead, albeit with a chapel attached. I have chosen for the most part to omit hospitals, which differ from our present conception, since those tended there were often poor and old rather than ill. Their layouts varied, but again a chapel of some form was obligatory, together with accommodation for the staff and those cared for. Many were small and poor, and few survived long term, unless associated with a greater religious house. Cells and granges, (both of which housed a few monks and lay brothers who provided local management and labour to properties at a distance from mother houses) have also been omitted more often than not.

For nearly all the greater religious houses in Britain, the Reformation meant suppression, which is a euphemism for the dismissal of the inmates, often with compensation, but sometimes if they had been obstructive a meeting with the executioner followed, the destruction at least in part of the monastic or collegiate buildings, and the appropriation of the possessions which furnished most of their income. In England and Wales the Dissolution took place in waves, for small monasteries in the mid-1530s, for large monasteries in the late-1530s, and for colleges and chantries in the 1540s. There was almost invariably no escape; Waltham Abbey certainly had the favour of King Henry VIII, and at the Dissolution the idea of converting it to a cathedral was explored seriously as a way to avoid its suppression, while a proposal to convert another royal favourite, Thornton Abbey, to a college was progressed, but neither scheme prospered, and both abbeys ended up in the dustbin of history, although some of the built structure has survived. Those establishments which fared best were in large towns and either already acting as cathedrals or ear-marked for that role. Although secular canons had to replace monks, and the chapters were down-sized, many individuals retained offices and functions, and the churches and sometimes ancillary buildings remained relatively untouched. Elsewhere, if the nave of a priory church had served the local parish, it or sometimes other parts of the church were often purchased from the King or a new owner to continue in that role, though the remainder of the priory complex was most often seen as a valuable source of building stone, which was scarce in much of the country, and ruinously expensive to carry long distances.

Reformation of the church was the ostensible justification for Dissolution, but in England and Wales, Thomas Cromwell and his master King Henry VIII knew that it was a unique opportunity to raise money for the Crown, so the end-point was usually a sale of the monastery in question, its large land-holdings and other property to a member of the aristocracy and merchant class, though Cromwell and his helpers found ways of channelling a proportion into their own hands. I do not know whether the sales were usually at knock-down prices in exchange for ready cash, but there were obviously real benefits for the purchasers, many of whom gained extensive lands sometimes meshing well with their previous holdings. Some of these purchasers saw the possibility of centring a new or extended estate on a house which was a conversion from monastic buildings, not always excluding the church, but more often for established landowners, the only value in a monastic precinct, as opposed to their new land holdings, was as already indicated, as a quarry which supplied masonry for other projects, after the monastic buildings had been demolished. Such action may also have seemed wise, because of the fear that a new regime might seek to reverse the Reformation, as indeed Queen Mary Tudor did a few years later; that agenda was bound to lead to the restored Roman Catholic Church attempting to repossess any monastic complexes left standing. Presumably, it was only the brevity of Queen Mary's reign which prevented this from happening in a bigger way.

The pattern in Scotland was different, though there were similarities; the Reformation began later, in 1560, and the dismemberment of monasteries was often a drawn-out process during which monks were allowed to die off naturally, on-site under the supervision of commendators, before establishments were fully secularised in the early 17th century. This important and profitable office, usually held by a lay member of the aristocracy, sometimes of royal birth, had been intruded increasingly in the 16th century to manage the commercial aspects of abbeys and priories; some were large businesses by the standards of the times. However, it was regarded as appropriate for a commendator to cream off a proportion of the revenues which he was responsible for raising, in return for his trouble in doing so. The office often became by custom hereditary, and its occupant, when the greater religious house was formally wound up, was normally left as the owner of a religious precinct, lands of greater or lesser extent, and a lordship to round things off, with the only qualification being to have retained the favour of King James VI.

The collegiate churches almost always had a parochial function, so it is unsurprising that most of them survived the Dissolution, but they were not unscathed. The cathedrals, (which were a mix of collegiate and monastic) fared best and mostly carried on largely unchanged in fabric and even personnel, provided they were willing to reorganise themselves with smaller colleges and embrace the new dispensation. Academic establishments, mainly in Oxford and Cambridge, were also little affected, and I have decided to exclude them from consideration, because their function was educational and distinct from all the other establishments dealt with here. (I omit Eton College and Winchester College for the same reason). The other collegiate churches lost their endowments as the chantry function of intercession with saints and angels to shorten the time spent in purgatory by their benefactors was swept away by the Reformation; in consequence they reverted to conventional parish churches, often too large for their reduced role, and served usually, though not always, by single priests. Most of their ancillary buildings became redundant, and usually were demolished, sometimes leaving no more than a road sign such as 'College Street', or 'Chanonry Road' as an external marker of their previous existence,

though some survived in different roles. Much less is known about these domestic buildings than the claustral buildings of monasteries, though some have been excavated.

Returning now to the question of how to create my compendium, I needed first to define 'medieval'. For all the greater religious houses, the Reformation was seminal, so medieval is taken to mean that the establishment was in existence before it took place, i.e. pre-1550 in England and Wales, and pre-1560 in Scotland, a slight stretching of the normal definition. Thus the compendium is selected from all of the religious houses, either monastic or collegiate existing before those dates, but excluding most hospitals and purely academic colleges as indicated above. A work of scholarship produced by Knowles and Hadcock lists the greater religious houses, and some others, in England and Wales giving their dates of foundation and suppression, and a sister volume written by Cowan and Easson does the same for Scotland, providing an obvious means to obtaining a useful list of all qualifying religious houses in the UK. However, their intention was to identify every religious house which had existed, whereas I wished my compendium to include only those establishments where there are coherent remains above ground. The word 'coherent' is intended to exclude those sites where masonry survives in the form of individual stones quarried from monastic or collegiate sites, which have been built into different structures; a wall, arch or column is coherent, a lintel or a date-stone is not. So my process was to begin with the lists taken from the references above, and whittle them down using information about what is now to be seen, drawn either from my own visits, contained in sources like the Pastscape, RCAHMS, and Coflein websites, and others which I reference, or discernible with the aid of Google Earth accessed usually through the Grid Reference website.

To clarify the mode of selection further, many sites have been excavated, and sometimes the foundations and other masonry have been left exposed; these sites have been included. However, if the evidence has been re-buried and there is no other visible masonry, the site has not been included, nor have those where there are earthworks, and cropmarks of all types, but nothing else. As indicated above, at the Dissolution, many monastic and collegiate buildings were taken into private hands, and where they survive, access can be limited, though some are now open to the public, albeit sometimes infrequently. However I have excluded a relatively small number of sites where survivals are embedded 'invisibly' in private property to which there is no public access, nor sightline from outside, for example undercrofts which are now basements. These considerations cleared the way for the preparation of my lists of greater medieval religious houses which have left masonry remains above ground.

The core of the document, 'Greater Medieval Religious Houses' on my website, drtomsbooks.com, is a collection of one-page sheets dealing with individual greater medieval religious houses. They are grouped by counties into nested documents accessible from the home page. Where, the number of qualifying establishments in a county is small, I have usually grouped adjacent counties, to limit the number of nested documents. Each such document begins with its own table in which all the qualifying establishments, in one or more counties, are listed, along with their locations on the Ordnance Survey. Some additional information is given in that table, and an information sheet is attached for all the sites listed; if it has not yet been visited, its entry is coloured red as a signal that the information presented has been derived only from a desk top exercise, involving the observations of others, and that the site has not been visited.

It is now appropriate to say more about the information sheets. Each may contain one or two photographs, occasionally three, of which one is mainly intended to give a ground-level view, true to the first impression that the site may make on a visitor. If the site is arranged in an unusual manner, or is complex, another photograph may be an aerial view, or less commonly, a plan. Alternatively, a second photograph might be of a distinctive or unusual feature, such as a doorway, gatehouse or tower. The majority of the photographs are my own, but that is not true of the aerial views, and plans which I have taken most often from the websites of the buildings concerned. The lack of specific attributions concerns me somewhat, but to include them all would have jeopardised the layout of the compendium, and I am following a path well-trodden; the posting is in no way a commercial undertaking. However, I make a general apology in the hope of mollifying anyone who might be upset. Returning to the form of the sheets, The written paragraph which makes up the remainder of each, always begins with a brief guide to the location, to amplify the grid reference. Foundation dates, the order to which the house belongs, and its status, (whether abbey, priory, collegiate church, etc.) are supplied, together with the numbers of religious personnel resident at different times, during the life of the establishment. The latter, along with the figure for net income in the 1530s, (1560 for Scottish religious houses) which I will discuss in a little more detail in the next paragraph, should convey an idea of the size and wealth of the institution. I sometimes touch on major rebuilding or refurbishments, and on the style(s) of the buildings, whether Norman, Gothic, Decorated or Perpendicular, if these matters are relevant to what remains standing. The date of suppression follows, along with a broad description of the fate of the complex thereafter; its sale and whether elements were de-roofed, demolished, or converted to other purposes. Finally, I indicate which parts survive, in such conditions as a roofed building, a high ruin, a ruin, or as foundations/footings only. I have extracted some of this information and include it in the table which begins each nested document. The compendium brings together data assembled from a number of sources which are not difficult to access, but hopefully it will be convenient to have it in one place, along with photographs of the sites concerned.

The incomes quoted for English and Welsh institutions were assembled by Knowles and Hadcock, and are presented as net income calculations furnished by the institutions themselves, usually in the run-up to the Dissolution. One can argue as to whether various incentives might cause these to be underestimates or perhaps, less likely overestimates, and wonder about the risks attached to being discovered in such inaccuracies, no doubt rather greater than submitting a present-day tax return with errors. However, taking them at face-value, they seem to indicate that a residential institution clearing £1000 per annum was wealthy compared with its equivalents, while anything less than £100 suggests the opposite, and that there are some surprises when income is placed alongside status and numbers of resident clergy. When multipliers are applied which relate values in 1535 to current values with regard to purchasing power, the picture is clarified a bit; they were obtained from a website, measuringworth.com. The appropriate multiplier is 451, so £1000 becomes £450000, and £100 becomes £45000. The wealth of such religious institutions as perceived by contemporaries was much greater, because as the aforementioned website makes clear the total wealth of the country was so much lower, even correcting for purchasing power. Another factor of 10 would not suffice to account for this effect, which if less tangible, is certainly an explanation for some of the hostility, which punctuated relations between religious institutions and those near to them in the medieval period. Similar, but fewer comprehensive figures are presented for Scottish institutions by Cowan and Easson dated to 1560, but in Scots pounds. The authors suggest a divisor of 5 to convert to pounds sterling, which may be on the low side, but I have applied it

to obtain the numbers in the information sheets to allow direct comparisons across borders. The multiplier for 1560 is 277, smaller, in part because of the inflation generated in the years following the English Dissolution, but the overall message is similar, namely that the wealthier Scottish religious institutions had incomes measured in 6 figures, in what we would now regard as a very poor country.

On the next page of this document, Table 1 shows how many of the qualifying establishments are to be found in each county or group of counties, and how many of them have been visited. More importantly, it provides the links to the sets of information sheets for counties and groups of counties; the documents are accessed by clicking on the relevant geographical entities as they appear in the 2nd column. It can be seen that a total of 751 sites of greater religious houses were identified during the desk-top exercise, (actually, a few more were considered, and then discarded after visits). As can be seen, 601 sites have been visited, leaving 150 which have not been observed, and it follows that a few of them might be present under false pretences. It is also true that the visits were not all similar in nature, ranging from thorough investigations lasting for an hour or two, to views across fields sufficient to establish the presence of ruins but little more. As regards the visits, the bias towards the north of the country is obvious; I have always lived in that region, and as a result reaching sites there has been easier.

I referred earlier to my website, Historic Bridges of Britain, which presents information about old bridges in a similar way to that just described for greater religious houses. However, on the former website, I go on to analyse the information collected in detail, not least because I thought I had acquired sufficient expertise to make my views of value. In the case of Greater Religious Houses, I cannot claim a level of expertise to compare with many who have studied the subject for a lifetime. Accordingly my sights here are set lower as already indicated, and I am content to present my assemblage of information and photographs, in the hope that it might prove interesting and useful, without any analysis. The end-point of the document is Table 1 on the next page, and the information to which it gives access.

Table1 Locations of Greater Medieval Religious Houses and Visits Status

Region / Country	County Group	No. of Sites	No. Visited
Scotland	Northern Isles, Highland, Grampian	17	15
	Stirlingshire, Perthshire, Angus, Fife	30	28
	Dumfries, Strathclyde, Argyll	26	21
	Lothians, Borders	29	29
		102	93
England – North	Northumberland, Durham	34	34
	Cumbria, Lancashire	21	20
	Yorkshire	61	58
		116	112
England – East	Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire	36	34
	Norfolk	46	45
	Suffolk, Essex	43	34
	Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire, Bucks, Herts	30	20
		155	133
England – Midlands & Marches	Derbyshire, Notts, Leicestershire, Rutland	31	30
	Cheshire, Staffordshire, Shropshire	42	34
	Warwickshire	23	15
	Worcestershire, Herefordshire	23	21
	Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire	32	21
		151	121
England – South & London	Kent	29	14
	Berkshire, London, Surrey	20	7
	Sussex, Hants, Isle of Wight	44	27
		93	48
England – South-West	Wiltshire, Dorset	25	17
	Somerset	20	13
	Devon, Cornwall	41	24
		86	54
Wales	Clwyd, Gwynned	14	12
	Powys, Ceredigion, Carmarthen, Pembroke	21	16
	Gwent, Glamorgan	13	12
		48	40
TOTAL		751	601

References

I have listed only those books and websites which have influenced the content of my information sheets, but it would be easy to double or treble their number, if the criterion was to be changed to relevance or just interest. I have omitted all guides to individual sites, whether the booklets produced by English Heritage, Historic Scotland, Cadw, the National Trust, the iconic ones produced in earlier days by the Ministry of Works, or the leaflets to be found in smaller churches. They have been indispensable, but to include them would result in a very long listing.

TITLE	AUTHOR(S)	PUBLISHER	DATE	Comments
In Search of the Knights Templar – A Guide to the Sites of Britain	Brighton S.	Phoenix	2006	
Medieval Church Architecture	Cannon J.	Shire	2014	
Medieval Religious Houses - Scotland	Cowan I.B. & Easson D.E.	Longmans	1976	Comprehensive and indispensable
Scottish Medieval Churches	Fawcett R.	HMSO	1985	
Scotland's Best Churches	Hume J.R.	Edinburgh University	2005	
The Collegiate Churches of England & Wales	Jeffery P.	Robert Hale	2004	Strong on churches, disappoints on college buildings
Medieval Religious Houses – England & Wales	Knowles D. & Hadcock R.N.	Longmans, Green	1953	Comprehensive and indispensable
The Cathedrals, Abbeys & Pories of Wales	Mc Cormick T.	Logaston	2010	
English Medieval Monasteries 1066-1540 – A Summary	Midmer R.	Book Club	1979	My starting point, an excellent survey
The Medieval Abbeys and Pories of England and Wales	Morant R.W.	Trafford	2004	Comprehensive but hardly user-friendly
A Guide to the Abbeys of England and Wales	New A.	Constable	1985	Valuable
A Guide to the Abbeys of Scotland	New A.	Constable	1988	Valuable
Medieval English Friaries	Salter M.	Folly Publications	2010	
Medieval Abbeys and Cathedrals of Scotland	Salter M.	Folly Publications	2011	
Abbeys, Pories and Cathedrals of Wales	Salter M.	Folly Publications	2012	
The Old Parish Churches of Scotland	Salter M.	Folly Publications	1994	
Discovering Abbeys and Pories	Wright G.N.	Shire	2004	

Websites

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<http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/>
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